

Teamwork grows in the workplace

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ROYAL OAKS — To help stave off out-of-state and foreign competition, Monterey Mushrooms Inc. is bringing collaboration to new level.

Monterey Mushrooms, the largest mushroom grower in the United States, was awarded \$1,038,600 from the state’s Employment Training Panel in January to train workers in a collaborative workplace program, with the goal of empowering employees while cutting costs and increasing efficiency.

The program will begin at company farms in Las Lomas and Morgan Hill, as well as expand existing training programs under way at the company’s sprawling Royal Oaks plant.

At that facility, 650 union members and 70 salaried employees work year-round to grow, pack and ship white, crimini, portobello and oyster mushrooms. Funding pays for training materials and instruction while the company pays employees for their time, CEO Shah Kazemi said.

The program, funded by the Employment Training Tax paid by California employers, awards matching funds to firms threatened by growing competition. This year, Seagate Technology in Scotts Valley also received \$1,512,000 for job training.

According to Kazemi, training programs that began two years ago have fostered communication at the company, which has its headquarters in Watsonville.

“You allow each team member to understand how decisions are made,” he said. “The question is, how do we involve employees to really become stakeholders, to get away from debates into a dialogue?”

Benito Flores, who represents union employees at the Royal Oaks site, remembers when squabbles between workers and management were a daily occurrence. But as

the training took off last year, grievances dropped considerably. Since the collaborative program began, workers continue to meet weekly with their supervisors to discuss problems and offer suggestions.

“Now, we sit down and discuss the problems and make changes together — and the company accepts the ideas of the workers,” said Flores, who has worked at Monterey Mushrooms for 29 years.

“Communication is the most important thing,” he said.

Before the course began, discussion was heating up over a proposed change that would have had workers harvesting at 5 a.m., an hour earlier than normal. For the company, that would have meant trucks could arrive at Southern California distributors sooner, but that didn’t sit well with workers. The debate diffused when both sides compromised on picking certain mushrooms out of sequence to ensure they were ready for shipping, Flores explained.

The relationship between workers and employers at the 36-year-old company has changed dramatically in just two years, Flores said. He added that the partnership will help keep the company from moving out of state.

“Things have gotten a lot better,” he added. “We are working together with them as they listen to workers more.”

Irrigator Martin Garcia has also seen his share of improvements. Before joining the collaborative workforce program, each person had their own system for hydrating soil beds where mushroom spores develop. In a series of meetings, irrigators developed their own ideas and worked with management on a streamlined system.

“They do the job, they know it best and they came up with standardized procedures,” said

Ed Stoll, the company’s human resources manager. “It made them feel better about their jobs and it benefits the company to have the job done correctly.”

Now that each irrigator understands the process better, they make better decisions, Garcia said. In fact, he is so enthusiastic about the training program that he ran to show visitors a copy of the standard operating procedure he helped craft, which lists each step irrigators take, from stepping into a disinfectant pool when entering the room to choosing the appropriate hose.

“If we want to make a decision about whether to add water, we can,” Garcia said. “If we want to call the supervisor, we don’t feel like we’re going to be reprimanded.”

Garcia, who has worked at the company for four years, said he is more sure of himself now. He added that new standards have improved quality, meaning that when the growing season ends, crews picking mushrooms earn more money for their harvest.

From the company perspective, the training initiative has earned immense returns.

“We have seen a tremendous change in behavior and attitude,” Kazemi said. “We’re trying to do things right the first time, to show appreciation for the importance of the worker.”

According to Stoll, workers are also more attuned to the needs of the marketplace since the training began at Monterey Mushrooms.

“They know that unless we can become competitive, we’ll go the way of other companies,” he said.

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